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Why George Bush Is Not a Nice Man

In his campaign, George Bush gave his speech writer a list of words that have "special meaning" to him. Among them:

Family, grandkids, love, decency, honor, pride, tolerance, hope, kindness, loyalty, freedom, caring, heart, faith, service to country, fair play, strength, healing, excellence.

Yes, we are talking about George Bush the current president, the slanderer of Michael Dukakis, the invader of Panama, the former employer of Manuel Noriega, the mentor of Dan Quayle, the overcrowder of prisons, the silent observer of domestic suffering, the Caribbean buccaneer, the tormentor of the addicted, the flag-waving Constitution trasher. The same guy.

And 79% of the American public, according to the polls, have fallen for it, accepting without an iota of skepticism the Orwellian phrases, so antonymous to reality -- like "Operation Just Cause" and "Integrity Fund" -- that roll daily out of the White House.

We have a problem and I fear it is as great as the one that we experienced under Bush's predecessor. Reagan at least appeared to believe what he was saying; his words were rooted in a morality however twisted, bathetic and self-serving it might be. With Bush, the chasm between the persona he presents and the public policy he pursues is so vast that it resists any explanation short of the psychopathic.

There is, to be sure, a strong element of traditional aristocratic conservatism in the man: the arrogance that leads to seeing oneself as benevolent lord rather than democratic leader, the inability to transfer personal values to any public policy, the assumption that those who govern should not be questioned too often about too much. But there is something more and troubling: The cynicism of the words when laid against the actions and the utter amorality of the latter.

There was, during the Reagan years, the recurring concern that our president didn't really understand what was going on. There is every reason to believe that Bush does. Whereas Reagan was a loose cannon, Bush is a hired gun. Whereas Reagan was the self-made man, manipulating a nation to play out his puerile fantasies, Bush has been, his entire life, the loyal factotum of interests that have returned the favor by making him what he is today. Reagan was an evangelist for the system; Bush *is* the system.

With Bush, the seedy military, corporate and intelligence junta has finally achieved its coup. Bush is the first president who can be absolutely relied upon to serve them without deviation, without doubt and without a price -- the faithful servant of the corporation and The Company.

The danger involved in this cannot be underestimated. At risk is nothing less than democracy itself. At the moment that a wave of democratic fervor is sweeping across much of the rest of the globe, we find ourselves turning our backs on the very freedoms others seek. At a time

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when much of the world is demanding more openness and honesty from its governments, we are tolerating extraordinary levels of secrecy and deceit.

The evidence comes from far more than such obvious examples as the flagrantly unconstitutional war on drugs. Consider such little noticed erosion as the attempt by the Bush administration to introduce a security system that would repeal even the modest reforms achieved in the Eisenhower era to end the madness of McCarthyism. Consider the gag order being signed by millions of government and defense workers (despite Congress's unenforced order that no money be expended in its behalf), a gag order that is already reducing the exposure of government and contractor fraud and illegality. Consider the 'black budget,' approved annually by a Congress that is not permitted to know what is in it, a secret budget now larger than the amount we spend for education, transportation, agriculture or the environment. Consider the refusal of Congress to exert its constitutional rights against the power of the president. Consider the dossiers on members of Congress that still voices on the Hill, the social-climbing by reporters that still voices in the media, the ever-growing federal intrusion in local matters that stills the multiple voices of democracy, and the inertia of the Democratic party that stills meaningful opposition.

Bush has come to power at a time when many of the forces that might provide a check on anti-democratic policy have become effete, corrupt or timorous. Our courts, our national legislature, the political opposition and the media have been, to a large degree, bought off, scared off, neutralized or anesthetized. Just as bad, we have in great measure given up teaching our children the elementals of democracy and government, thus find ourselves trying to grow the American idea with neither fertilizer nor seed. The infrastructure of American democracy is rusting away, save for the federal executive. And history tells us when that happens tyranny is not far ahead.

This is the country George Bush has come to rule. He comes as the agent of interests chronically disinterested in democracy, but none more so than that of the intelligence apparatus. It is extraordinary that during the recent campaign so few paused to ask whether a former director of that apparatus, which is called in other countries the secret police, should be elected president. Yet perhaps it is as good an indication as any of the deterioration of our democratic instincts.

The Central Intelligence Agency has always been an anomaly. It is, after all, an agency dedicated to telling the White House the truth while deceiving everyone else. This seems at best a risky and overly optimistic premise. While the CIA appears to have provided accurate and useful information from time to time, it has regularly bungled badly as an autonomous practitioner of foreign policy, a task for which it has no constitutional license nor any perceivable skill.

Had the CIA kept to information-gathering it might today be held in the same esteem as, say, the Government Accounting Office or the Bureau Labor Statistics. But the gestalt of the agency would not permit such a unadventurous limitation. Spawned by the wartime OSS, the CIA has been, among other things, a haven for preppies who wanted to play soldier of fortune. Lyndon Johnson once warned an aide to remember that the agency was made up of graduates of Princeton and Yale whose daddies wouldn't let them in the brokerage firm.

There is a hint of George Bush here: Skull & Bones prankster, Navy pilot, oil field wildcatter, and, finally, -- dream come true -- head spook. If the policy of our nation were not involved, we could chalk it all off to the imperatives of arrested development. But while mindless adventurism and winning with no quarter given -- as goals in themselves -- are harmless enough on the playing fields of Andover, they becomes quite another matter when one ends up running what is in effect America's secret State Department. And worse when one becomes president. George Bush, once sworn to secrecy or deceit towards all but those with the absolute need to know, now finds himself

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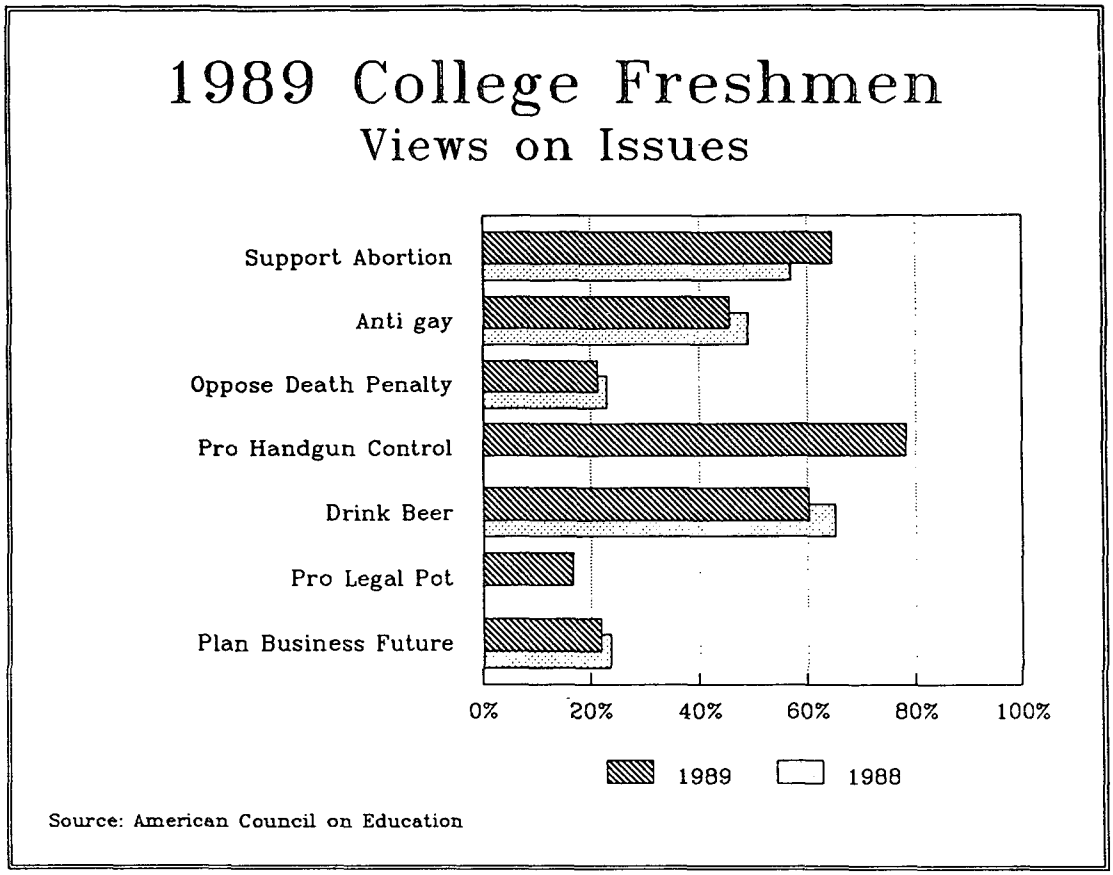

According to a poll by the American Council on Education, this year's college freshmen are strongly pro-gun control and support legal abortion in greater numbers than last year's class. Anti-gay attitudes have decreased as well as has interest in a business career. On the other hand, support for the death penalty has gone up.

the one person to whom he was once expected always to tell the truth. It's not the ideal training for the job.

Bush has given more than a few indications that he has not comfortably made the journey from being America's head liar to being the mediator of the American truth. The Panama fiasco found Bush relying on the old tools of secrecy and deceit, misrepresenting the situation to his new employers, the American people, and relishing his ability to fool the press and others, even waiting until the last minute to inform Senor Endara that the president of the United States was about to ordain him president of Panama.

In this instance, as in the drug wars, Bush has given absolutely no sign that he entertained any constitutional or moral doubts about his policies. While the Congress debates for hours such questions, Bush dismisses any ambivalence as beneath consideration.

Such is not the confidence of a moral person. It is the arrogance of the corporate eighties and of the ethical desert of Langley. Like a political Michael Milken, George Bush seems to regard winning as its own justification.

That this is so can be circumstantially corroborated by the battles Bush chooses to fight. Seldom has a president ignored so many major issues while going to the mat over such tertiary questions as proper respect for the flag, the inadequacies of a minor republic, the casual use of drugs, or whether he or the Congress get credit for extending the visa of Chinese students.

Even his manic desire to lower capital gains rates, predictable enough given the nature of the forces behind him, seems oddly off-center. One gets the sense that he got into the fight because he thought he could win it and now must win it because he got into the fight.

Yet let a truly major issue comes to the fore and George Bush is AWOL. At a moment when America could truly influence the course of European history he speaks more as an observer than a participant. Bush dealing with the primary problems of our time often seems as detached as a guest professor on the McNeil-Lehrer Report. Often he doesn't even bother to analyze a problem, assuming that having simply mentioned it he has done his part. As Henry Adams was once described by his wife, he chews more than he can bite off.

Bush has no programs worthy of the name for dealing with Japanese economic competition, global warming, the national health and housing

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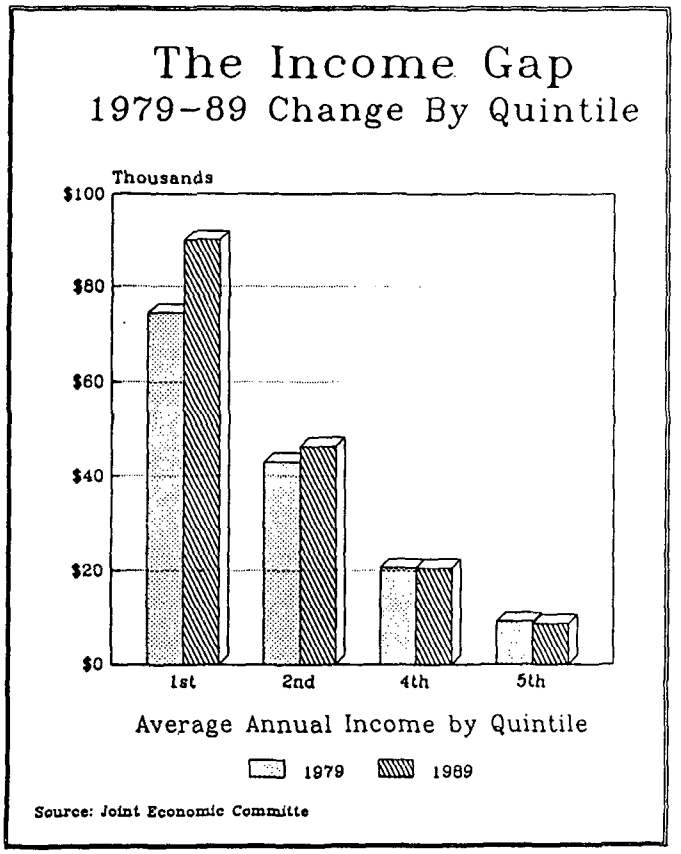
crises, or the looming recession. These are real problems requiring real solutions and the president has gone over the hill on them.

If he finally does become engaged in an issue, he pursues it in the take-no-prisoners manner of a yuppie buyout specialist. Both the Panama episode and the drug war found Bush resorting to such tawdry tactics as disinformation and fear mongering, not to mention accepting without a token of remorse the deaths of hapless victims of his current obsessions. Panama civilians, American soldiers, inner city drug addicts, all must make the supreme sacrifice -- not for God and country but for Bush and Atwater.

Yet this is the man so many -- beginning most inexcusably with the media -- says is a nice man. Well he's not. He deceives us. He lacks democratic sensitivities. He serves not the country but a conglomerate of avaricious and/or authoritarian interests. He runs away from the tough but bullies and hectors the weak. He offers us not "decency, honor, pride, tolerance, hope, kindness, freedom, caring, fair play" and all the other virtues he claims to revere but rather sullies them with demagoguery, cruelty and cynicism. He may well be one of the most dangerous presidents we have ever had not because he is intrinsically the worst, but because his great weaknesses and our own could easily form a critical mass and detonate the American idea. If the American opposition doesn't start pointing this out in every way it can, if instead we repeat the sad error of constantly deferring to personal myth of yet another president, the Bush era may be remembered as the time when a new Iron Curtain fell, an iron curtain between the government of America and its own people. -- *Sam Smith*



DRUG BUSTS

Cracks in the administration crack wars are showing in an interesting place: the US Embassy in Holland. A report from the embassy has suggested that the administration should study Holland's approach to drugs which involves tolerating soft drugs and treating drug abuse as a health problem. The memo was written last May but just recently obtained by Associated Press. The Dutch enforce laws against hard drug trafficking but concentrate on the dealers and don't harass users. You can even buy marijuana and hashish in coffee shops and youth centers. But contrary to the Bush-Bennett mythology, such an approach does not encourage the use of drugs. In fact, only 1.8% of Dutch teenagers use marijuana as opposed to 9.1% of American teenagers. Says the head of the Dutch program, "We think the drug problem is a normal problem like a lot of other social and health problems. That's why I'm also responsible for alcohol and tobacco policy."

The Dutch have only 60 to 80 drug-related deaths a year in a country of nearly 15 million. The American drug death rate is nearly six times as high. Further Holland has had one-eighth the incidence of AIDS as the US.

Said the US Embassy report, "There is virtually no market for crack. Dutch policy-makers attribute the perceived success of their drug policy to its public health orientation; to its extensive system of addict identification, therapy, counseling and social re-integration; to the national social welfare regime; and to their prioritized enforcement of the narcotics laws."

Thanks to a sheriff in Denver we now have an idea of what those allegedly sophisticated profiles of drug couriers are all about. Testifying in a case involving a black man stopped by police and arrested on drug charges, Sheriff A.J. Johnson revealed that the profile was based on a number of factors including:

- o race
- o fast-food wrappers on the car floor
- o no luggage
- o motorists who have driven long distances non-stop
- o out of state drivers licenses

The federal judge hearing the case ruled that the profile violated the rights of blacks and hispanics.

When Marion Barry was arrested his lawyer failed in his initial attempts to obtain a copy of the videotape because federal officials said they were "enhancing" it to make the scene clearer. What does this mean? What it

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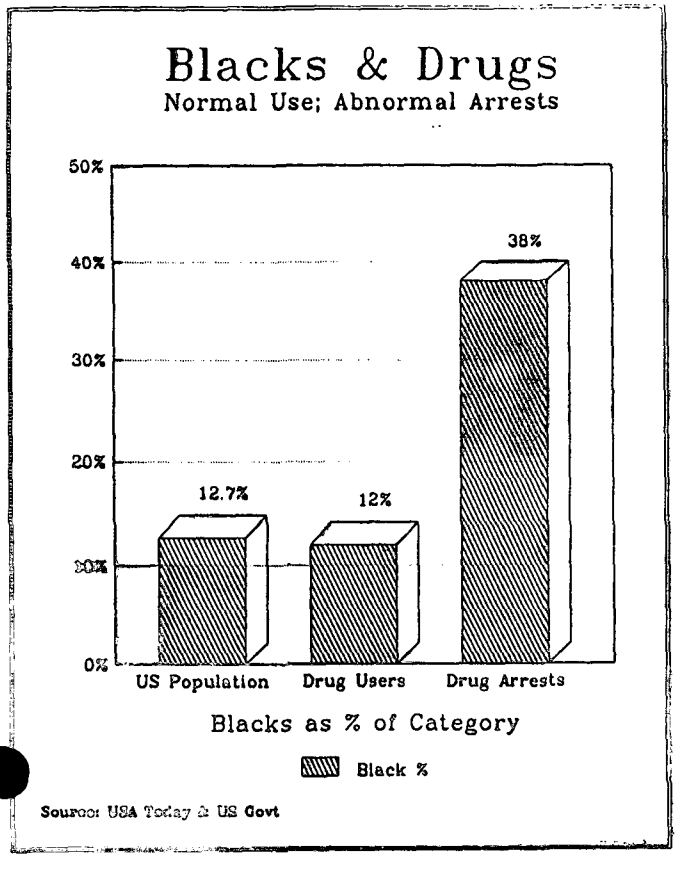
can mean was described in a recent issue of the *Washington Journalism Review* which reported that video technology has advanced to the point that images can be changed or moved in the control room.

A device called the Harry is currently available that alters moving images at 30 frames of video per second. In a demonstration for *WJR*, NBC News artists gave Phil Donahue black hair and a beard with the aid of an electronic paint brush. Says *WJR* of the NBC video artist: "He could have changed the microphone in his hand to a gun, or a rose. Or, by combining video images, he could have had him running around Oprah Winfrey's studio. Or Beirut. Or Sesame Street."

Thomas Wolzien of NBC News offered the scenario of a video that showed Nicaraguan PT boats attacking a US destroyer. The administration releases the film as real. Do we go to war? Or is it the Harry?

Like other technology, once it's there the temptation to use it is great, witness the proliferation of computer hacking. Even such a staid publication as *The National Geographic* admits to have used an earlier still picture version of a digital paintbrush to move one of the great pyramids to a better location for its cover photo.

Drug comstockery has hit new heights in Maryland where the governor has proposed a drug plan would revoke the licenses of convicted drug users to practice a profession or trade, drive a car, or hunt and fish. The law would not just apply to lawyers and doctors but to hairdressers, taxi drivers or anyone else who needs a license to work. In effect, the penalties for minor drug offenses would exceed those for many more traditional crimes -- often handled by probation, community service or short jail terms.



TOPICS

I don't want to get into the thick of the H.L. Mencken controversy but I can't help noting that those surprised to find that he had certain strong, and wrong, prejudices apparently had never read him. Reading Mencken is like eating crabs; you have a lot to throw away in order to get to the meat.

Whether the effort is worth it is, of course, a proper subject for debate. But the assumption by self-righteous and ever so politically correct prigs like Richard Cohen of *The Washington Post* that the judgement rises or falls on Mencken's level of bigotry tells us more about the ahistorical provincialism of the critic than it does about Mencken.

History does not fare well under close examination by current moral and cultural standards. To apply such standards to the past not only tends to obscure the wisdom that can be obtained from the past but ultimately negates the possibility of progress and human evolution. If we are not in some ways better than our forebears, after all, what is the point of the whole exercise?

To test this thesis, I ignored Cohen's misgivings and looked up *Negro* and *Jew* in Mencken's classic and out-of-print *New Dictionary of American Quotations*. While producing many complimentary epigrams on the subjects (the dictionary is a scholarly and not a polemical work), this exercise also confirmed that Cohen has his work cut out for him. Applying current anti-bigotry standards, we should not only stop reading Mencken but likewise eschew David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Carlyle, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, Bismarck, Martin Luther, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Blaise Pascal, John Dryden, Montesquieu, Charles Lamb, Coleridge, and Nikolai Lenin.

This is only a sample but suggests the problem in attending only to history that is as pure as we think we are.

In fact, bigotry of the Mencken variety was a common part of his culture and his times. This is a sad fact.

Today the public figure who expresses bigotry is fortunately rare. This is a happy fact.

These two facts in combination speak to some measure of human progress. It does not, however, follow that all varieties of progress proceed at the same pace. We can, for example, become more civil and more stupid at the same time. Our newspaper columnists can become more politically correct and also more insipid. And so forth.

In fact, critics like Cohen display their own form of bigotry, a sort of hubris of the present, piously confident that their own values are all the world needs to know.

History, like Emerson's description of life, is "evermore beauty and disgust, magnificence and rats." The wise reader can tell the difference and does not surrender the good to avoid contact with the bad.

Besides, with whom would you really rather spend an evening: Richard Cohen or H. L. Mencken? -- *S.*

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Meanwhile, the excesses of the federal drug ayatollahs continue. One of the more remarkable examples is a recent operation of the DEA in 46 states in which raids were conducted on retail stores specializing in indoor garden supplies. The idea was to hit the source of supplies for home-grown pot. Some eleven store owners were arrested. The unconstitutional raids seized records of business people conducting legal activities and resulted in harassment of their customers. One of these was Joseph Hoberman of North Carolina, who grows orchids. Police showed up and demanded to search his premises, warning him that if he refused, they would come back with a warrant and "we won't be in a great mood." Hoberman permitted the search which produced nothing but orchids. Hoberman's suspicious activity: ordering a light meter from a store that advertised, among other places, in a pro-marijuana magazine.

In one of the more novel arguments for a change in national drug policy, some Oregon decriminalization advocates are claiming that marijuana plants can be turned into a high quality paper free of all traces of the chemical dioxin, a cancer-causing substance found in normal paper. Says one activist, "You can make every grade of paper from toilet paper to newsprint at one fourth the cost."

THE WEATHER REPORT

The Census Bureau has decided to let people list their living relationship in a variety of new ways. The new questionnaire will permit citizens to describe themselves as unmarried partner, housemate, roommate, roomer, boarder, foster child or other non-relative. This may give the first count of gay and lesbian partners in this country.

From *The Times* of London via the *LA Weekly* comes a disturbing story about AIDS that has been ignored by American media. According to *The Times* there is concern in some quarters that a smallpox vaccine administered over the past 13 years by the World Health Organization might have caused the disease. The report first came from a WHO adviser who says he was hired when the international organization began to have worries about the vaccine. But he claims WHO buried his study so he went to *The Times*. WHO denies the hypothesis of the story.

The theory points to certain circumstantial evidence such as the similar timing and distribution of AIDS and the vaccination program, concentrated in African countries. The one South American country receiving the vaccine was Brazil, which has the highest AIDS rate in the region. Some 14,000 Haitians received the vaccine while visiting Central Africa.

If the theory is correct the import could be devastating. Zaire, the world's leader in AIDs cases, received some 36 million of the vaccinations alone.

The Times also reported the death of an American soldier just three weeks after he had been vaccinated for smallpox, who while previously healthy, contracted AIDS during this time.

A study of community colleges by the University of Michigan finds that they are not helping low income students prepare for a four-year college. The study, by Valerie Lee and Kenneth Frank, found that most of the students who do transfer to four-year campuses had the high school grades to go to them in the first place. They reported that their study suggests "that the community college may actually perpetuate rather than ameliorate social stratification in high education."

A Tennessee state legislative committee has approved a measure that would set a maximum fine of $1 for beating anyone who burns an American flag.

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